

The MARKET²⁰¹⁰ RESEARCH EVENT

A conversation with Kelly Styring
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You've been in the industry for almost 15 years now. At some point during this period you've probably had some time to reflect on what it was that brought you to this industry in the first place. Why research? What was it that drew you to this industry?

Kelley: Absolutely. That's a great question. I sort of hate to admit how long I've been in this business. It definitely pins down your age for everyone. I recently learned that one of the secrets to use is to shorten your bio. I may actually do that in an upcoming event. But, I think it was pretty interesting. Years ago when I was interviewing for Procter and Gamble in trying to make a change from industrial design (so I was working on the product design side of things) into market research, I was asked that very question: "Well, why do you think you want to do this?" And it quite simply occurred to me that in the field of design, whenever I talked with people that we called the "end-user", my designs improved. So, I think I was doing my own consumer investigations all along. As a matter of fact, I know I was. When I was designing exercise equipment for Black & Decker and I went to a university for a sports medicine clinic and the more I hung out there (I learned from both the athletes and the trainers), the better my design was. I started figuring that out as a designer and then when I went to Graduate School, I took a course in market research and this light bulb went off. At the same time, I was doing focus groups with my job. On the design side, we were actually doing some groups and it all came together for me: "Wow, I would really love to do this." I felt that it was extraordinarily helpful to the innovation side of the business. I also found it fascinating to get a glimpse into how people think and feel about things and then extrapolate that to mass it to the population. It kind of combines art and science and math and folklore into this pretty interesting tapestry, I guess, that kind of under

groups everything that I see now in my life's work. And I think that is how, initially, that's how it came about.

Where, in your opinion, is the industry headed? Where are we going?

Kelley: That's an excellent question and I am quite passionate about what we do.

There are probably three things going on, and two of them are counter-veiling forces. The first is, I think, we are going to continue to see the emergence of technology and our reliance on technology to make things better, faster, cheaper. And in prior ways of thinking, good, fast, cheap, you have to pick two and it can be good and fast. And so I think technology is breaking a lot of those rules and I'm always very interested in breaking rules because that's how you push through to new things. So, I think we are going to see more mobile. I think we are going to see more analysis of what has been called: "rivers of newness" (information that has been created in an ambient way through social network and other streams of information) are now going to be optimized in terms of how we analyze them because in the past we had kind of voyeuristic ethnography where instead of sitting in somebody's living room watching them knit a sweater or whatever it is that you are watching, we are now watching conversations online. And I think the analysis of that information is going to become more and more sophisticated as the coding improves and as our ability to add context improves. So, I think the ways that we reach people and then the analysis, in particular, seem to become much more sophisticated. At the same time, I think we are going to continue to see growth in very, very low tech. So, I think we are going to get into people's homes, we are going to dig under the kitchen cabinets and we are going to pull everything out of the refrigerator and we are going to continue to do the archeology studies (which have been the hallmark for me). I'm not seeing any in that. And then I think we'll see some fusion of those two things. So, you can do low tech/high tech, which is what I do in my most recent study: "In your Car: Road Trip through the American Automobile" where I did put my head under the back seats and get Cheerios in my hair and pull apart some cars, but at the same time, designed a fairly sophisticated, quantitative study and some fairly unique ways of analyzing that data so that we can come up

with hypotheses still from kind of the down and dirty and then delve into it more deeply in the quantitative end to have some assurance that we are not just making stuff up.

Last year at the Market Research Event, we heard the stat that 85% of market research leaders are dissatisfied or neutral with the impact of market research in their organizations. That's astounding. Why is that, in your opinion?

Kelley: I think that is an astounding statistic, but in some ways, not at all surprising in others. I think the market research industry has struggled for years, a very long time, with our status within an organization. Just our physical status. If you think about it, we are staff. So, we are accounting or upper maintenance. We are not lines. We are not brands, we are not R&D, we are not sales. So, just our physical functionality puts us in the second seat to begin with. Then, the bigger issue though, I believe, is not the condition or the context within which we live, but it is our behaviors within that context. And so, you know, it almost has to be a combination of the two. And so, we are sitting in the back seat and we are acting like we belong there because we answer the questions that we're asked. We, as an industry, rarely delve outside of that to provoke thinking and then when we do, we rarely present it in a way that is appetizing and intriguing and provocative because conflict is hard and the way that you get attention for your work often is by creating dissonance within groups; creating discomfort and creating an environment where people are willing to hear what you are saying. So, I personally get really tired of hearing people say: "We told them that three years ago. They are not listening to what we said." Well, that is a symptom. That is a symptom that -- we own all the tools to not only ask the questions, but answer them. So, I'm not sure exactly where that reluctance comes from, other than some personality that might lead us in to begin with. For example, if you have a piece of information, present it in a very provocative way. I can remember Larry Dicehart (sp?) at Pizza Hut presenting a piece of information that suggested that people ate fewer pizzas when they got married and after they had kids. But, instead of presenting it that way, he said: "Marriage and childbirth is killing our business." He said it in a very provocative way so that people would listen -- would sit up and listen. I use that example, with his

permission, in many of my speeches because it is a great way of just re-framing a simple concept in a way that gets people's attention. I don't think that we are attention seekers by nature. I think that might be part of why we are drawn to this profession. We are investigators. We are rational. We are analytical. We don't tend to want to stand in the middle of a room and say: "Hey, look at me!" But, the more we do that, the more provocative we are with that information; it creates an appetite for the data. So, if we create the proper appetite, then I believe people will act upon it and we will have more impact if we were just a little bit brassier about what we are doing.

You touch on this next question a bit when you reference Larry's example. How do you think researchers can exercise more influence over strategic projects internally? Are there any tips you have? You've had a ton of influence over your career. What has worked for you?

Kelley: Some of the things that have worked quite well for me are actually tying back to the business and helping – not just providing a pile of interesting facts that we carry around, but also tying it back to specific, numeric business results. I can remember at Frito Lay working with Risky to try to help the company understand that we actually were providing advertising GRPs to the motion picture properties that we were purchasing in order to build displays in store. That put us in a position of paying a little bit less for those properties. But, that wasn't the position Dwight and I took. The position Dwight and I took was Pixar should be paying you to put the Monsters on the bag because here is the advertising you are bringing to them and it is much more valuable than the properties. We didn't go out -- it is kind of a negotiation, if you think about it, because we didn't go out and say: "Gee guys, you could pay less." Which is, ultimately, what they did. We said: "They should be paying you." Which is a bit of a provocative decision in order to get people to actually look at the data, but it was specifically tied to math. We had the math. It wasn't just a theory. It wasn't an opinion floating around in space. That is the power of market research is that you have the facts behind you to make a case.

You mentioned this before, but I want to get into it a little bit deeper because it is such a hot topic right now. The impact of technology,

specifically in the social media space, on the research industry has been tremendous. Has this been good for the industry and why?

Kelley: I think in some ways it has been very good. I think it helps us on the qualitative side, in particular, find unique individuals. And it helps us do a little bit better job of screening them for being opinionated or articulate or very specifically helpful. Those are thin slices that we are looking for; very specific, narrowly defined people because they represent either extreme positions or they represent some behavior that we want to observe. I think it has been immensely helpful for that. I think some of the organizations that are able to analyze word-of-mouth through social media and are starting to combine that with their marketing mix modeling, that's absolutely brilliant. I think where it could start to fall down is if we forget that it is a self-selected sample. And so while there might be billions and billions of people on Twitter (and I've done quite a bit of work in the Twitter space), if you look at it closely, a lot of them are spammers. A lot of them are just putting stuff out there to promote their businesses, they are goofing around, there is a lot of role-playing go on. There are entire genres of people performing fictional lives, kind of fictional performances with each other on Twitter. It's just fascinating in terms of a voyeuristic standpoint, but not at all helpful from a research standpoint. Let's say, for example, that you are in the dental care industry and you are looking very closely at different streams of information about teeth. This whole vampire thing could really throw you off. I think you should be cautiously optimistic about it. I think we have to be optimistic about it because that's where the growth in our industry is going to come from for the time being and I think that things that make you a little uncomfortable (I think this makes a lot of people uncomfortable), things that make you a little bit uncomfortable usually means they are new and different and they are actually doing something. I'm always in favor of doing something vs. not. I just think we have to be sort of careful that we don't allow it to run off the rails, so to speak, and self-selected samples are proportionate of that.

As we welcome this new generation of researchers into the industry who, for all intents and purposes, have grown up with this technology, how do you think that will impact the industry?

Kelley: Yeah, I think it's going to be really interesting. I have a 10 year old and a 14 year old and one of them asked me a few years ago: "Mommy, why do we call it dialing the phone?" They didn't understand the word "dial". They've never seen a dial telephone. So, what will their life be like? We talk about mobile – well, I guess it's not that different from 10 or 15 years ago when we were looking at online: "Oh, my gosh! Should we do interviews online or not?" And in the 50's, Procter and Gamble going: "Oh, my gosh! Should we do telephone interviewing?" And how can we walk away from door-to-door interviewing in the 70's? As more and more women entered the workforce, door-to-door interviewing became impossible, right? So, I think the bigger question is: "How can we inspire the best talent to join our industry to help us capture this native intelligence that they have about the tools?" Because certainly a 25-year old person is going to be much more adept at coming up with the next good idea regarding mobile than someone like me. I'm a happy mobile user, but my whole world isn't in that space. So, it's how do we nurture them and feed them with the capacity to be fearless about coming the next idea and not wag our finger and go: "Well, we tried that before" or "There are so many problems with that." Absolutely. There are way more problems than good things about any idea when it's new. When it's new, I think we have to cut people some slack, give them a little bit of freedom to experiment and prove their way like Procter and Gamble did in the 50's and 70's and like all of us did with online. You just have to prove your way to get there.

With all the business behind us, let's find out a little bit more about you. What was the last book you read?

Kelley: That's really a great question because I am a parallel reader. I always have three or four books going. It's kind of crazy, right? I read a stupendous amount online, magazines and books. I don't really think of it until somebody asks that question because I just enjoy it so much. In fact, I finally had to break down and get proper reading glasses because it was affecting my ability. My arms weren't long enough to hold the book anymore to see the letters. So, I'll talk to you about four books that I found fascinating reading. Of course, I also do read creepy vampire books just for fun and enjoyment.

The four books I've really enjoyed lately -- I enjoy Chuck Palahniuk. He's a local Portland writer who wrote: "Fight Club". I don't know if you've seen that film. It's really inventive. And yeah, "Choke" and "Haunted" and lots of great books. But, "Survivor" is probably my favorite because it is conceptually unusual. It's written kind of backwards and the page numbers are backwards. So, I enjoy books that are conceptually very different. Which brings me to number two. Steven Hall wrote a book in 2007 called: "The Raw Shark Texts", which is impossible to say – T-E-X-T-S; multiple text. And it's about a conceptual shark hunting a man in space between our physical world and what they call the "unworld". That sounds very science-fictiony, but it is actually incredibly exciting and entertaining. I'm not deeply into science fiction, but this is actually deeply conceptual that is fun and interesting to read and I find it kind of a century story. I've re-read recently James Gleick's book: "Faster: The Acceleration of (Just about) Everything." That's a book that I read in 2002 – the year that it was published. And he has some very interesting, anecdotal presentations of time and how to think about time, but it's backed up by science. So, unlike some of the brief history of time or other books that I actually find intellectually unreadable; I cannot read it. I try, but I can't read it. This is engaging enough and anecdotal enough that it's incredibly interesting. And then I just picked up a book this weekend by Austin Kleon – K-L-E-O-N and it's called: "Newspaper Blackout". And this is a book that I bought at an art museum in Austin, Texas. Basically, what this man has done is taken a page of the newspaper and he's redacted the entire page except for the words that tell a story. And so each page is its own short story. It's usually only a sentence or two, and literally it's a page covered with black magic marker with just a few words showing that tell a story. And it's called: "Newspaper Blackout". And it's a beautiful book to look at and the stories are short and fascinating. I really enjoy conceptual stuff where I walk away thinking differently from when I started reading it.

Next question. Last great conversation you had with was with whom?

Kelley: It was probably my son. We were in Austin, Texas this past week. He's 14 and he just competed in a national guitar competition with "Guitar Foundation Youth Competition". He's one of 45 kids in the nation who was chosen to compete on classical guitar. And the discussion that we had was

him actually thanking us for investing our time and energy and love and nurturing this thing that he enjoys so much. I think that is a rare gift when you have that kind of conversation with your child, particularly your teenage child. It wasn't a lengthy conversation, but it made me sit back and appreciate how wonderful and special that relationship is. I think it is easy to get lost in our hectic lives and not sit back and thank the people who mean something to us. So, the fact that he initiated that kind of conversation was pretty interesting.

The smartest researcher in the industry is who?

Kelley: That's a scary question, right? I think what I'd rather do is take you back to a slice of time where I sat in the middle of the most incredible kind of "brainwich" – brain sandwich. I reported to Dwight Risky at Frito Lay for a period of time and at the same time I had both Amelia Strobel (who is now with Kraft) and Michelle Adams (who is still with PepsiCo), who reported to me. I think it was a really catalytic time where so much new thinking was propelled through the system. And I felt like the hub on the wheel in some ways where my role was to nurture the people underneath me while absorbing as much as I could from Dwight Risky, who is just a brilliant, brilliant man, in addition to being a very good business mentor. At that moment in time, I felt like all three of those people helped me grow to such an extraordinary extent that when I look back on it, I think it was the "Indy 500 of Market Research". It went on for about a year and when it was over I went: "Holy crow, that was incredible."

What is your dream project?

Kelley: I've spent quite a bit of time in the last couple of years on ethnography, as I know many of my co-workers have done as the industry has grown. But, I have a fascination with longitudinal ethnography. I've been fascinated with it since I first saw Sachs Insights present something at an IIR Conference, one of the very early The Market Research Events on the West Coast. They presented a longitudinal ethnography where they followed a college student from the night before she went to college, packing up her car to six months later and what that looked like. I would love to spend 10 years with a family. I'd really like to get to know a couple

and then how their household comes together and then how the children are introduced and then even, ultimately, how those children grow up and go away. And really understand those types of dynamics, even if it is done in small slices of longitude to really learn about those transition points I think would be fascinating. It's really very rare that you would find a client who would invest in such a thing because the time value of our work is so much more expedient than that. But, just to do some longitudinal ethnography would be immensely fascinating to me.